

the law of the land for nearly a decade. Which group of federal workers has suffered this unthinkable injustice? None other than the 39,000 nurses who work for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and have devoted their careers to caring for our nation's ailing veterans.

In the 101st Congress, the House and Senate passed the Nurse Pay Act, well-intended legislation that was designed to ease a national nursing shortage by allowing VA medical center directors to forgo the annual general schedule (GS) pay schedule that applies to virtually all federal employees. In theory, this new law enabled directors to give nurses higher annual raises than other federal workers so they could recruit and retain a quality workforce. Unfortunately, as soon as the national nurse shortage eased, the intent of the law was manipulated and directors started using their discretion to deny raises, provide tiny raises, and even reduce pay rates.

Today, I introduced the VA Nurse Appreciation Act of 1999, legislation that will rectify the pay injustice VA nurses have suffered. This legislation will ensure that Title 38 VA nurses receive the annual GS increase plus locality pay so they will be on equal footing with other federal workers in their area. It will also give the VA Secretary the discretion to increase pay, or delegate this authority to directors, if they have trouble recruiting or retaining quality nurses.

In the last few years some congressional attention has been focused on the VA nurse problem, and the VA has quietly "encouraged" directors to give raises. Still, VA nurses have fared far worse than other federal workers. Overall, the average annual increase for VA nurses was 50% lower than the standard GS increase in 1996; 60% lower in 1997; 25% lower in 1998; and about 17% lower in 1999.

Furthermore, abuse from the Nurse Pay Act is widespread and knows no geographic boundaries. From 1996–1999, nurses at 16 different VA medical centers had their pay rates reduced by as much as 8% while other federal workers received annual GS increases ranging from 2.4% to 3.6%. In addition, from 1996–1999, NO raises were given to Grade I, II or III nurses (statistically 98% of the VA nurse workforce) at about 80 VA medical centers around the country. Worse still, some nurses go several years without raises, such as in Long Beach, CA, where VA nurses received no raises in 1996, 1997, 1998 or 1999. At other centers, meanwhile, nurses have received embarrassingly low annual increases—often 1% or lower.

Mr. Speaker, the Nurse Pay Act deserves credit for ending a nursing shortage and making salaries competitive. For example, in its first year nurse pay increased by at least 20% at 82% of all VA medical centers. Unfortunately, the well-intentioned measure's locality-based pay system eventually ended up punishing many of the 39,000 VA nurses.

Our VA nurses deserve praise for standing by our nation's veterans. Many could have sought higher paying jobs in the private sector, jobs that offer annual increases and signing bonuses. Instead, most have chosen to stay with the VA because they care deeply for our ailing veterans and enjoy a sense of reward and patriotism from their specialized work. In fact, most VA nurses have devoted their entire careers to caring for our nation's veterans. The average VA nurse is a 47-year-old female with 11 years tenure.

As a Congress we strive to take care of our veterans. Therefore, we should feel embarrassed that we haven't taken better care of the dedicated nurses who care for our veterans. The Congress never meant to create a mechanism where a VA nurse could receive an annual raise worth 92 cents a week before taxes or go several years without a raise. It's no way to treat those who care for our nation's veterans, and we have an obligation to fix it.

Mr. Speaker, our VA nurses perform a vital service for our Nation's veterans with great care, professionalism, and compassion. We now have an opportunity to demonstrate to our nurses that they are truly appreciated by passing the VA Nurse Appreciation Act of 1999.

CONGRATULATIONS TO NATALIA TORO

HON. MARK UDALL

OF COLORADO

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, March 23, 1999

Mr. UDALL of Colorado. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to honor Natalia Toro, who took top honors in the Intel Science Talent Search. Ms. Toro is a 14 year-old senior at Fairview High School in Boulder, Colorado.

In winning this prestigious award, Natalia bested 40 finalists, who were selected from a nationwide pool of 300 semi-finalists. In addition, she is the youngest winner ever of the Intel Science Talent Search.

Ms. Toro's entry was a physics project in which she studied oscillation of neutrinos, the most elusive of subatomic particles. She completed her research on this subject while participating in the Research Science Institute at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology last summer.

While I take pride in highlighting Ms. Toro's achievement in this competition, I am equally happy to salute her love of science and learning. I firmly believe that we can offer our children no greater gift than to instill in them a love of learning. The Toros are an example of how parental involvement can play a critical role in a child's intellectual development, as well as the child's overall success in life.

Mr. Speaker, it gives me great pride to share with my fellow members of the House of Representatives the outstanding achievement of Natalia Toro. I would like to acknowledge her parents, Beatriz and Gabriel Toro, for inspiring her thirst for knowledge. The Denver Post recently highlighted Natalia's achievement. Mr. Speaker I submit a Denver Post article to be included in the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD.

[From the Denver Post, July 14, 1998]

THE SCIENCE OF NURTURING

Congratulations to Natalia Toro, who at age 14 already has become a role model, especially for other first-generation American youths.

Natalia's proficiency in mathematics and science propelled her into first place in the Intel Science Talent Search for her work in high-energy physics. She is the youngest winner ever in the 58-year-old contest formerly run by Westinghouse.

With her prize \$50,000 scholarship, the Fairview High senior now plans to attend either Stanford University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology or the California Institute of Technology.

How did this daughter of Colombian immigrants achieve academic excellence?

Her mother credits Natalia's natural curiosity.

"She's very curious. And she's a hard-working person, and I think she really has a passion for learning. I don't think we did anything special," says Beatriz Toro.

But while Natalia's parents won't take credit for her accomplishments, they surely fueled her love of learning.

Beatriz and Gabriel Toro came to America from Colombia in 1979, they chose to teach their only child English as her first language. She learned Spanish later "with our help," her mother says, and is fluent in both.

Toro, a civil engineer, and his wife, who has degrees in psychology and nursing, sent Natalia to the small, private Bixby Elementary School in Boulder, then to the public Fairview. She also has attended classes at the University of Colorado.

"Those schools, they did their part with my daughter," Mrs. Toro says.

But the parents did their part, too. When Natalia asked questions, they tried to answer them. When they didn't know the answers, they headed to the library to find the answers.

"I think the most important thing is that your kids are happy," Mrs. Toro says. "When you're telling the kid, 'You have to do this and you have to do that,' I don't think it works. I wouldn't push a child."

"It sounds funny, but I didn't do anything special with my daughter."

That depends on what constitutes "special."

Not all parents take a child's questions seriously enough to research until they find the answers. But doing so surely send the message that learning is fun.

Not all immigrants are able to make sure their children learn English before the parents' native language. But doing so surely eases a child's way through U.S. schools.

And not all families place a priority on happiness. But it seems only natural that a happy child would be a curious, alert and motivated child.

We salute Natalia for the path she has taken, and we commend her parents and her schools for helping her to find that path. This is a girl who does Colorado proud.

SERVICEMEMBERS EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY ACT OF 1999

HON. BOB STUMP

OF ARIZONA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, March 23, 1999

Mr. STUMP. Mr. Speaker, on March 18, 1999, I introduced H.R. 1182, the Servicemembers Educational Opportunity Act of 1999, along with Mr. SPENCE, Mr. SMITH of New Jersey, Mr. QUINN, Mr. EVERETT, Mr. HAYWORTH, Ms. CHENOWETH, Mr. LAHOOD, Mr. HANSEN, Mr. MCKEON, Mr. GIBBONS, Mr. TALENT, and Mr. BILIRAKIS. This measure would enhance benefits under the Montgomery GI Bill for persons who enlist in the armed services for 4 years of active duty service or reenlist for 4 years of such service effective October 1, 1999.

In exchange for a 4-year enlistment or reenlistment, individuals would receive an enhanced Montgomery GI Bill that would (a) pay 90 percent of the costs of tuition and fees, (b) pay a sum equal to the reasonable costs of books and supplies, (c) pay a monthly stipend of \$600 per month for full-time enrollment (or

proportional amount for less than full-time enrollment), and (d) repeal the current \$1,200 reduction-in-pay to be eligible for the benefit. Each individual would be eligible for 36 months (4 academic years) of benefits.

Our goal in introducing H.R. 1182 is twofold. First, when high school students consider their post-high school plans, we want them to consider military service as their first option, not their last. It is no wonder the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard are experiencing major recruitment problems. Most college-bound youth and their parents see a tour of military service as a detour from their college plans, not as a way to achieve that goal. We want to reverse that way of thinking.

Second, we want to empower the youth of America—our future veterans—with a GI Bill that would be limited only by their aspirations, initiative, and abilities. We want a GI Bill that would allow a young person to be able to afford any educational institution in America to which that individual could competitively gain admittance.

Our legislation is inspired by, and is substantively very similar to, a recommendation made in the comprehensive January 14, 1999, report of the Congressional Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance, chaired by Anthony J. Principi.

As we look to the future, I believe it's instructive to glance at our past. As my colleagues are aware, 55 years ago the Congress sent to President Roosevelt's desk a piece of legislation that truly transformed our Nation—arguably the greatest domestic legislation since the Homestead Act. Legislation that is popularly known as the GI Bill of Rights. The World War II GI Bill was one of the boldest investments our Nation has ever made. It was certainly one of Congress' finest hours, because World War II veteran-students did not just pass through the American system of higher education, they transformed it. That legislation, and those veteran-students, created today's leaders and the modern middle class.

Mr. Speaker, I cannot recount how many times in my 22 years here that a Member of this body has said he probably would not be here today if it were not for the World War II GI Bill. Our proposal to return to a World War II-type GI Bill is not about a program of the past, it's about empowerment for the future. Has society, and our values, changed so dramatically that a revered education program that was so successful 55 years ago no longer applies to today's servicemembers?

For 223 years, military service has been our Nation's most fundamental form of National Service. When we talk about education policy in this country, I think our starting point is that we owe more to those who voluntarily have worn the uniform because they have earned more by virtue of their years of service. The fundamental difference between the GI Bill that we propose and other meritorious Federal student financial aid programs is that ours is truly earned.

About 60 percent of active duty servicemembers are married when they separate from the military, and many have children. They find out quickly that the gulf between the purchasing power under the Montgomery GI Bill and current education costs is indeed a large one. Today's Montgomery GI Bill, properly named for our distinguished former colleague who worked indefatigably on the legis-

lation for almost 7 years prior to its enactment, unfortunately falls short by \$6,007 annually in paying tuition, room and board, fees, books, and transportation at public institutions, and \$15,251 at private institutions. Veterans deserve better. And I note the cost figures I cite are for 1996—the most recent data available.

Through fiscal year 1997, some 13 years after the enactment of the Montgomery GI Bill test program, only 48.7 percent of veterans have utilized it. Conversely, between 1966 and 1976, 63.6 percent of Vietnam-era veterans used their education benefits.

We need a GI Bill that harnesses the unique resource that veterans represent. We want to accelerate, not delay, their entry into the civilian work force. We need a GI Bill that rewards veterans for faithful service and that makes it more likely that they will serve among the ranks of the country's future leaders and opinion shapers.

What better investment can we make in the youth of this country? A GI Bill that would be limited only by the aspirations, initiative, and abilities of the young man or woman involved. A GI Bill that largely would allow a young person to afford any educational institution in America to which that individual could competitively gain admittance. What a powerful message to send across America. What an emphatic statement to send to working and middle class families who go into great debt to finance their children's higher education because they are told they make too much money to qualify for Federal or State grants.

In closing, I submit to my colleagues that why my cosponsors and I are proposing is not just about an education program that we believe would serve as our best military recruitment incentive ever for the All-Volunteer Force; or after their service provide unfettered access to higher education at the best schools; or provide unbounded opportunity for our youth that cuts across social, economic, ethnic, and racial lines. What we have proposed is what is best for America.

I believe the notion of service to our Nation, service in an All-Volunteer Force, and the corresponding opportunity for all of us to participate in our great economic system sustained by that service, is a core value we simply must pass on to the next generation. It is a core value we can neglect, but only at our own peril.

Mr. Speaker, I urge all Members of the House to join me in support of H.R. 1182.

THE VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER EQUIPMENT ENHANCEMENT ACT OF 1999

HON. SAM GEJDENSON

OF CONNECTICUT

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, March 23, 1999

Mr. GEJDENSON. Mr. Speaker, I rise, along with Mr. ENGLISH from Pennsylvania, to introduce the Volunteer Firefighter Equipment Enhancement Act of 1999.

Communities in my district and around the nation rely on volunteer firefighters to protect lives and property day in and day out. My district includes 54 towns, and there are 91 volunteer fire departments. These brave men and women leave their jobs and get up in the middle of the night to battle fires, respond to auto

accidents, and provide a wide range of other emergency services. These services would not be available without these volunteers. We must do as much as we can to help our firefighters as they put their lives at risk to help people in their communities.

Many of our nation's volunteer firefighters companies have taken on tasks far beyond firefighting. Years ago, volunteer companies could fulfill their mission with one pumper truck and a few ladders. Today, as we ask our volunteers to take on more and more tasks, they need much more equipment. However, our tax laws have not kept up with the changing demands.

Section 150 (e)(1) of the tax code states: "A bond of a volunteer fire department shall be treated as a bond of a political subdivision of a state if * * * such bond is issued as part of an issue 95 percent or more of the net proceeds of which are to be used for the acquisition construction, reconstruction, or improvement of a firehouse * * * or firetruck used or to be used by such department."

The law only allows volunteer fire departments to use the benefits of municipal bonding if the department is building a fire station or buying a firetruck. They cannot issue bonds to buy ambulances, rescue trucks or other emergency response vehicles which are critical to protecting citizens across our nation.

The legislation that Representative ENGLISH and I are introducing today would simply change this provision by striking the phrase "or firetruck" and inserting "firetruck, ambulance or other emergency response vehicle." It is a simple change in law that will help volunteer fire companies acquire the tools they need to carry out their expanded mission. The bill would also extend the tax treatment that volunteer fire companies receive to volunteer ambulance companies.

I believe that if we are going to ask our volunteers to take on these additional burdens, we must help them obtain the equipment they need.

This is a small first step in the United States recognizing volunteer firefighters as the heroes that they are. Unpaid, but not underappreciated, we have much more to do to help firefighters, but this will be a good first step.

COLUMNIST DENNIS ROGERS ON
THE PLIGHT OF TOBACCO FARMERS

HON. BOB ETHERIDGE

OF NORTH CAROLINA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, March 23, 1999

Mr. ETHERIDGE. Mr. Speaker, I grew up on a tobacco farm, and I continue to grow tobacco today. Higher federal taxes and litigation by the states have severely altered the market for tobacco and have led to income losses of thirty five percent for tobacco farmers in the past two years alone. The actions that have led to this point have been taken in retaliation against the industry and its practices, but the harm has been felt on the farm. Tobacco farmers need help.

Since coming to the House two years ago, I have tried to articulate to Congress the plight tobacco farmers are in as a result the ongoing tobacco wars. Earlier this month, Dennis Rogers, a columnist with The News and Observer